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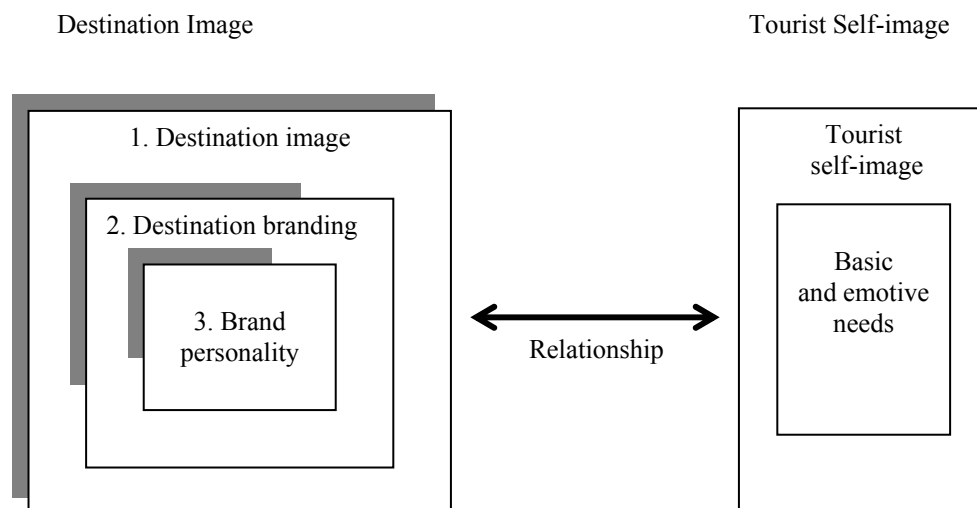School of Management
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From destination image to destination branding: An emerging area of research

The idea of branding a destination is a relatively new one and the academic investigation of such a process is still in its infancy (Gnoth, 1998). Although the words 'brand', 'branding' and 'destination image' have already appeared in many academic studies and industry conferences, no apparent effort has been made to distinguish between destination image and destination branding. The purpose of this short commentary is to stimulate thinking on destination branding and to outline its relationship with destination image.

As the choice of destinations available to consumers increases, an effective destination 'positioning' strategy becomes necessary. A key component of this positioning process is the creation and management of a distinctive and appealing destination image. And thus, a considerable amount of time and money is spent establishing a positive image in order to influence consumer decision-making.

We argue that effective destination marketing should follow a three-stage process in order to develop a favourable destination image. Figure 1 outlines this process.

Figure 1. Destination Image and Destination Branding

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The most frequently cited definition for destination image is: *'the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination'* (Crompton, 1979). This involves an individual's mental picture of a place based on their knowledge and other global impressions. The image, a person has of a tourist destination is a function of various points of reference. Its root may go back to our early school years when we studied the geography or history of a country. Information obtained from friends, relatives or media sources also contributes to our final picture. In addition, of course, our image of a destination is shaped through any of our own tourist experiences.

Image is an evaluative (e.g. 'good/bad', 'true/false') and multi-dimensional construct. Therefore the attributes of image can be grouped according to various components. Although destination image is regarded as an attitudinal construct, it is not very clear how it differs from our attitude towards the destination. We argue that these two items are related but different constructs in terms of the image building process.

Destination image is more cognitive and involves subjective knowledge of a destination (e.g. expensive, exotic, urban, cold, developed) and therefore its evaluation may vary from one person to another. For example, some tourists may consider Turkey to be a European holiday destination while others disagree with this image. We believe that a tourist's attitude towards a destination also includes an element of strong emotional attachment (e.g. exciting, fun). So, bearing in mind that, on many occasions, the evaluation of destination image includes some element of emotional attachment, the question arises as to what extent the overall view of a destination is emotional.

The process of destination branding begins, in reality, when the evaluation of destination image includes a strong emotional attachment. These two concepts share some common ground but destination branding represents the emotional component of the destination image. A tourist destination may have a name, but not necessarily a brand name (e.g. New York, Paris). Only branded destinations would establish an instant emotional link with their customers. Therefore we suggest that branding is the second stage of building a favourable destination image.
In the ever more competitive tourism marketplace, destinations are increasingly adopting branding techniques to craft an identity which emphasises the uniqueness of their product. Those marketing travel destinations, just like those marketing other consumer products, have had to turn to branding to distinguish their 'product' and to convey a positive message that will motivate the consumer. However, evidence to support the successful implementation of destination branding has been mixed. Based on intensive consumer research, Crockett and Wood (1998) revealed that 'Brand Western Australia' had taken over from 'Western Australia' as a premier nature-based tourism destination in the global market. More recently, Morgan *et al.* (2002) reported a successful example of brand building by taking the case of the '100% pure New Zealand' brand, where the destination was positioned as an appealing niche player in today's global tourism industry.

Successful destination branding involves establishing a mutual relationship between destinations and tourists by satisfying tourists' emotional ('relaxing', 'pretty') and basic needs (e.g. eating). In particular, branding of a destination helps to establish a link between destination image and consumer self-image. One of the important determinants of branding is the brand personality – this emphasises the human side of the brand image. In practical terms, brand personality uses human personality traits to describe a destination image (e.g. family oriented, friendly, exciting, interesting, original). A destination that forms a clear identity in tourists' minds can be easily branded. By the same token, brand personality brings the destination image

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alive. This same idea has been shown to be successful in marketing goods. For example, Coca-Cola is portrayed as traditional, Pepsi is young and Tango is funny. Marlboro cigarettes have a rugged image, while Virginia Slims have an attractive, modern and liberated image. It can easily be applied to destinations such as Paris can be portrayed as romantic, Las Vegas is exiting and entertaining.

Although consumers seem to have little difficulty in assigning human personality traits to particular brands, the theoretical 'proof' underpinning brand personality is quite limited. Limited work has been done to tell us how and why consumers endow inanimate products with qualities of human personality (Fournier, 1998). Yoon, Ekinci and Oppewal (2002) argued that brands would be perceived as personalities when they displayed three essential personality features: (1) behaviour, (2) interaction with the environment and (3) consistency or stability of traits. The same features are imposed on branded products using marketing techniques. For example, a brand symbol is animated in order to symbolise behaviour (e.g. the M&M chocolates walk in pairs and talk to each other, the Michelin man and the Energizer rabbit come alive).

Brands can also be updated to keep up with changing times and customer tastes (e.g. Kentucky Fried Chicken decided to shorten its name to KFC to lessen its association with fried and unhealthy food). However, most successful brands display remarkable consistency of core traits over the years (e.g. Ivory soap has consistently promoted its 'purity' since 1881, with the slogan 'It floats'). The result of successful marketing means that a brand differentiates itself from other (competing) brands, just like a human being distinguishes him or herself from other people. We suggest that those involved in tourism marketing should use communication techniques and product development tactics to 'build' a personality for tourist destinations. In the meantime, academics are invited to explore this exciting concept by engaging in further research.

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